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FY16 Annual Report: Turkey-US Strategic Dialogue

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Introduction

The strategic relationship that binds the United States and Turkey has endured over a half a century. Various regional challenges have tested this relationship, leading to periods of active cooperation and disagreement. Recent changes in Turkey's domestic politics, as well as evolving regional conditions, have introduced new dynamics into American-Turkish relations. While Washington and Ankara remain committed to similar policies governing nuclear proliferation and non-proliferation, regional instability and domestic uncertainty have led to questions as to how nuclear issues will affect future relations between these two allies.

The formation of policy-related think tanks and forums is a relatively new phenomenon in Turkey. Regular international conferences and scholarly dialogues on security matters pertaining to Turkish interests occur infrequently despite the broad and complex range of challenges facing Turkey and its immediate neighbors. Matters pertaining to nuclear proliferation and non-proliferation are rare points of discussion in popular and policy-related media. In 2012, NPS organized the first dialogue to specifically broach Turkish and American interests and views on nuclear weapons and proliferation. A second dialogue on nuclear issues was hosted by USIP in early 2015. Both events raised similar topics of discussion: the NPT, NATO and extended deterrence, bilateral relations and policing dual use and illicit materials. The two dialogues reaffirmed several core points of agreement shared by Washington and Ankara. Both countries are committed to maintaining and promoting the fabric of the NPT; Turkey recognizes and relies upon the extended security guarantees provided by NATO; proliferation and non-proliferation issues remain topics of frequent discussion between Turkish and American representatives. Yet in both cases, questions concerning how specific regional affairs or relations shaped Turkish or American policies towards nuclear issues were only briefly touched upon.



US-Turkey Dialogue, 2016: Goals and Participants

The object of the dialogue, held in June 2016 in Munich, Germany, was to establish an open exchange regarding American and Turkish perceptions of present and future regional relations. Through discussion of the drivers and interests that influence how Washington and Ankara approach several key Middle Eastern states (namely Iran, Syria, Iraq and the GCC), it was hoped that the dialogue will shed new light on the ways in which American and Turkish policymakers perceive and plan for the future. This broad framework for the dialogue was conceived in the interest of establishing a baseline for future engagements. With the identification of key points of interest or debate, it was hoped that this dialogue would evolve into a more finite set of discussion revolving more specifically around issues related to proliferation, deterrence and non-proliferation.

The crafting of the dialogue's agenda was undertaken in consultation with stakeholders in Washington and Ankara (including current and former State Department officials). Suggestions were also elicited from multiple parties at the US mission in Ankara, security experts in Turkey and other current and former officials in Washington. The majority of Turkish participants were members of the Political, Economic and Social Research Foundation (SETA), arguably Turkey's foremost and largest think tank. All possessed doctoral degrees, most coming from American universities. American participants comprised both NPS and non-NPS personnel, all whom also possessing doctoral degrees. Divided up into five separate panels, Turkish and American participants were assigned to discuss a specific country or region. After delivering their formal presentation, the floor was opened to Turkish and American participants for questions and discussion.

US-Turkey Dialogue, 2016: Key Findings:

Turkey and the United States share much in common regarding how they prioritize and frame their core security objectives within the Middle East. There is a strong and generally uniform desire to maintain the region's territorial and administrative landscape. To this end, the maintenance or restoration of internationally recognized borders, as well as the desire to see establishment of strong states, are fundamental points of agreement. However, it is clear that there are certain corollaries or exceptions that complicate this understanding. Although there is a shared aspiration for more inclusive, functioning government in Syria and Iraq in particular, both the US and Turkey do



separately engage with conflicting factions within these states. The degree to which both states engage rivaling state and non-state forces in Syria and Iraq, intentionally or not, helps to entrench the factionalized or weak nature of these states.

It is clear that American and Turkish participants in the dialogue tended to differ on the severity of the security threats posed by forces in the greater Middle East. Though both sides agreed that terrorism ranks high among the potential security threats emanating from the region at large, participants voiced dissimilar views as to how Washington and Ankara prioritized these threats. In the medium term, there appears to be no great certainty as to how the security environment will unfold (especially once the conflicts in Syria, Iraq and the Arabian Peninsula are resolved). There is a sense that strategic rivalries may play a far greater role in defining how Turkey and the United States engage with various states in the region. To what degree these rivalries represent sources of existential danger is unclear. Increased Russian and Iranian influence do pose specific, and at times differing, security concerns for the United States and Turkey. American participants tended to depict the dangers posed by Iranian and Russian influence in geo-strategic terms. According to this view, past historical tensions greatly impact how Washington perceives Russia and Iran. Conversely, Turkish participants tended to appraise the impact of Iranian and Russian influence in the greater Middle East in more nuanced terms. While past history, as well as conflicting strategic interests, are perceived as causes of tension between Turkey and these two states, shared economic interests mitigate the extent to which the designs of Tehran and Moscow rival those of Ankara. Consequently, Washington and Ankara plan to confront or mitigate the potential threats posed by Russia and Iran diverge.

US-Turkey Dialogue, 2017: Expectations and Plans

Recent developments have heightened the significance of the findings of the 2016 dialogue and raised new questions. The July 15 coup attempt has led to a massive purge of Turkey's civil and military infrastructure and intensified the nationalist climate in the country at large. Tensions over the extradition of the US-based cleric Fethullah Gulen, who Ankara accuse of organizing the coup, has led to increased level of anti-American rhetoric in both the press and among Turkish officials. While these escalating tensions have not resulted in any immediate rupture in U.S.-Turkish relations, many experts



in both the United States and Turkey suspect that the post-coup political climate may eventually lead to dramatic changes to how Turkey cooperates with the United States and NATO. Some in both the United States and Turkey have speculated that such changes may also include Ankara's desire to develop an independent nuclear weapons program.

A second dialogue is intended to be held some time in the first quarter of 2017. It is hoped that the same Turkish participants will attend (although one has recently been appointed to head a government ministry). The format of this forthcoming dialogue is intended to change, shifting away from a formal panel discussion structure to a hybrid "war gaming" type composition. Far greater focus will be lent to the question of nuclear proliferation and extended nuclear deterrence with reference with specific regional security issues.